XIX

TIGHTENING THE FETTERS OF FINANCE

March, 1919

The New Meaning of Licence—The Question of Capital Issues—The Text of the Treasury Regulations—Their Scope and Effect—The Position of the Stock Exchange—Wider Issues at Stake—Should Capital be set Free?—The Arguments for and against—Perils of an Excessive Caution—The New Committee and its Terms of Reference—The Absurdity of prohibiting Share-splitting—The Storm in the House of Commons—Disappearance of the Retrospective Clause—A Sample of Bureaucratic Stupidity.

A CONTRAST between liberty and licence is a pleasant alliterative commonplace beloved by political writers, especially those with a reactionary bias. In the light of recent events it seems to be going to take a new meaning. Licence will soon be understood, not as the abuse of liberty, to which democracies are prone, but as a new weapon by which our bureaucracy will do away with liberty by tightening the shackles on our economic and other activities. For imports and exports the licence system is already familiar; if the mines and railways are to be nationalised we may have to be licensed before we can burn coal or go away for a week-end; if the Eugenists have their way a licence will be necessary before we can propagate the species; and before we can get a licence to do anything we shall have to go through